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"You've Made Mistress Very, Very Angry': Displeasure and Pleasure in Media Representations of BDSM'

Abstract

It has long been a convention of mainstream Western filmmaking to characterise the fetishist, the sadomasochist and the dominatrix if not as psychopaths, at least as individuals with self-destructive obsessions or behaviours that are dangerous to society. These so-called 'perverts' and their practices are also lampooned regularly in the mass media and continue to be narrative short-cuts in situation comedies, advertisements and so forth, stereotypes there partly to represent and fix the maladjusted sexual deviant living in 'normal' society. This paper considers some of these stereotypes from an alternative viewpoint, that of the BDSM community in Britain, based on a questionnaire conducted during May 2006. Since the range of practices that go to make up this lifestyle are predominantly based upon implied or fantasy narratives and vivid stereotypes, it seems appropriate to propose that pleasure may be drawn by the fetish and BDSM communities from their representation in the cinema.

Key words: BDSM, Cinema, Stereotype, Fetish, Sadist, Masochist, Mental illness

Pandering to Stereotypes

Despite an evident softening of public opinion towards the alternative lifestyles of BDSM and fetishism, traditional representations of the community and its practices have helped to fix a collection of stereotypical characters and scenarios in the public imagination. For a vast range of practices, it is represented by a restricted collection of signs and character types, some of which I shall explore below. Similarly, the costumes and props of the stereotyped fetishist or the sadomasochist, predominantly PVC, rubber or leather outfits, whips or floggers, savage high heels and gimp-masks, are incorporated into mainstream movies, advertising and music videos as a sign of the highly sexualised or dangerous man or woman, Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman,^[1] or the cast of Madonna's 'Erotica' music video^[2] for example. Certainly, a common construction of the villain in

mainstream Western filmmaking has been that of the sadist, a character with implied 'perversions,' such as homosexuality, transsexuality, confused sexuality, a suspension fetish or a history of child abuse, who draws pleasure of a kind from the infliction of pain or even the death of a vulnerable victim.

Consider, for example, Soviet double-agent and torture expert Rosa Klebb (Lotte Lenya), of *From Russia with Love*,^[3] whose dour expression, military uniform and masculine hairstyle construct a dyke stereotype, and who wields a metal knuckle-duster to test the strength of recruits. Her connoted lesbian sexuality inevitably becomes associated with her expertise in sadistic torture. Famke Janssen's performance as Xenia Onatopp in another Bond incarnation, *Golden Eye*,^[4] takes sadistic pleasure to new heights. Her particular fetish is murder, gasping in orgasmic delight whilst asphyxiating a man with her thighs, or becoming sexually aroused whilst indiscriminately machine-gunning the staff of a satellite control centre. Think also of the long-running television situation comedy, *Allo Allo!*,^[5] with the light-hearted sadomasochistic relationship between Herr Flick (Richard Gibson) and his secretary, Helga (Kim Hartmann), who wears suspenders beneath her uniform. Herr Flick himself is seen wearing stockings and suspenders in at least two episodes. His full-length leather coat, clipped German accent and strict demeanor send his submissive employee into paroxysms of erotic anticipation that are repeatedly postponed, only serving to intensify her excitement or, at times, exasperation. These characters are comic constructions of the sadist and masochist; the comic mode is frequently the arena for these character types, creating a gaze that makes them, to adapt Mulvey's phrase, to-be-laughed-at.

Another television example is the popular *Monty Python's Flying Circus* sketch, 'Blackmail',^[6] which features Michael Palin as a gameshow host presenting a game called 'Stop the Film,' extorting money from an unnamed gentleman who is secretly filmed visiting a dominatrix. In the sketch a flickery, hand-held 8mm film is shown of the man secretly visiting a suburban home, in Thames Ditton to be precise, whilst a sum of money rapidly increases on the screen. The gentleman in question is encouraged to telephone the studio to prevent the revelation of his identity, which he does, just as the dominatrix brandishes a flogger. The sketch works to both to ridicule the practice of sadomasochism and to expose the hidden perversions of the middle class. The Monty Python team was no stranger to giving fetishes a comic turn; even cross-dressing and transsexual desire figures in 'The Lumberjack Song': 'I cut down trees. I wear high heels, suspendies, and a bra. I wish I'd been a girlie, just like my dear Papa.'^[7] The enthusiastic lumberjack is rejected by the rugged male chorus and his sweetheart, since his urge to wear women's clothing and to 'hang around in bars' insinuates a perceived 'perversion,' namely homosexuality. With core Python team member Graham Chapman being an openly gay man, the goal of the sketch is clearly not to demonise homosexuality, rather it is to expose prejudice and enjoy a stereotype, to laugh at and draw pleasure from the happy confession of a man who likes to wear women's clothes. There is a suggestion in the sketch that it is good, therefore, to laugh at oneself and to pander to the stereotype. It is this potential enjoyment of the sexual pervert stereotype

that I wish to explore in this article, pondering on the positive – as well as the negative – receptions of common constructions of the sadomasochist, from which this select minority might gain pleasure.

This article does not aim to expand upon the history of BDSM, nor on the writings of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. What is important to emphasise, however, is that BDSM (Bondage, Discipline and Sadomasochism) is not a lifestyle or routine founded on the infliction and reception of pain, although this might be an element of some people's practices; it might instead be regarded as 'pseudo-violence' if at all. As Anita Phillips puts it, '[...] S/M practices are nothing like real violence [...]. In consensual sado-masochism the idea is to control pain for sexual purposes, to stop when it goes beyond that limit. To equate the two is like comparing traffic noise to a sonata.'^[8] Phillips implies here that all sadomasochism (or S/M) involves pain, which is misleading, but her comment encourages a re-consideration of the kind of intention behind the practice. In fact, much that is practiced in this lifestyle is along a binary relationship of dominant and submissive, character roles if you like, that are played out by practitioners. It may include pain, it may include sex, but certainly not always. There are those that indulge in practices such as genital torture and needle play, whilst there are many whose fetish involves the worshipping of feet or the wearing of rubber. Whilst there is a general consensus that fetishism and BDSM are different spheres of practice, there is a large crossover in costume and behaviours that tends to draw them together into the same community. Many individuals are in long-term, monogamous relationships, many are not. This community is, in fact, little different in its sexual identities than the world at large, and what they practice takes place in private at home as much as in dedicated club-environments. Ironically, the BDSM community itself celebrates stereotyping, to a degree, in the roles that individuals assume, the strict, immovable dominant, the obedient submissive who must be punished, and so forth. These stereotypes are closely linked to fantasy scenarios, narratives even, that are played out for the pleasure of all involved. They are usually, however, far removed from the scenarios typically found in the cinema that involve sadists and masochists.

I am indebted to the individuals from within the BDSM and fetish 'scenes' in the UK that I contacted via my questionnaire, many of whom provided very honest and carefully considered comments on how their lifestyle is represented in the media and on public perceptions of BDSM. I will be referring to a number of these responses throughout the article. The questionnaire was open, uncomplicated and anonymous and was devised to encourage as much candid honesty as possible through four questions:

1. Please list films or television dramas/comedies that you have seen which feature a sadomasochistic / fetish story or character.
2. In your own words, please describe your response to the representations found in these films and TV shows. Did you find them pleasurable, offensive, faithful, misinformed, misleading, humorous, etc.?
3. Please list films or television dramas/comedies that you have seen which seem to

feature sadomasochistic / fetish imagery, costume, etc., but which DO NOT have a story concerning the scene or the lifestyles associated with it.

4. In your own words, please describe your response to the representations found in these films and TV shows. Did you find them pleasurable, offensive, faithful, misinformed, misleading, humorous, etc.?

I received responses on a range of films, TV programmes, advertisements and general public opinion towards BDSM from a total of 25 individuals. Out of these, nine were female submissives, four were female dominants (or 'Dommies'), four were male submissives and six were male dominants. The remaining two were 'switch,' or 'omniviant'^[9] BDSM practitioners who enjoy expressing both a dominant and a submissive side in their behaviours. The diversity found in the community is reflected in the range of opinions expressed, but certain common agreements are evident that are explored below, together with textual analysis of some of the items discussed.

The Four Principal BDSM Stereotypes in the Media

There are, I believe, four key stereotypes that are part of a public consciousness or assumption, deriving principally from the sensational media, particularly tabloid newspapers. I have labeled them as: the Mature Dominatrix,^[10] the Young Male Sub, the Vamp Dominatrix and the Public Authority Male Sub. The male dominant and the female submissive are not commonly found in the sensational media. As one male dominant wrote in response to the questionnaire: 'It's okay to be a female Dominatrix, but if it's a male then it's an advantage-taking pig-man of a misogynistic chauvinist.' Certainly, contemporary perceptions of gender and gender-relations are such that the dominant male and the submissive female go against common sensibilities. I explore some examples of these in mainstream cinema later in the article.

One common media stereotype, then, the Mature Dominatrix, is a sexually voracious older woman, probably upwards of forty years old, dressed in PVC, with high heels, red lips and wielding a flogger or a riding crop. She is not truly sadistic, she is not genuinely harmful, rather she is a comic character who tends to be found in situation comedies and advertising. Since so many stereotypes operate as binary oppositions, the partner of the Mature Dominatrix is the Young, Male Sub. He is, in comparison to his Mistress, slim or even 'weedy,' naïve and impressionable. He is the perfect submissive partner to the Mature Dominatrix who is dominant in age, appetite and experience. An example of the Mature Dominatrix and Young Male Sub can be found in the 'Keep Britain Tidy' advertising campaign presented in cinemas in December 2005, developed to target the 18-24 year old cinema-goer, in which the mature dominant woman punishes a young man for dropping litter, brought to my attention by a female submissive.^[11]

A young male walks along a suburban street that has been 'dressed' to appear obviously artificial with large false flowers and strips of bright green turf in the gardens. He absent-

mindedly throws litter onto the pavement as the soundtrack plays a light-hearted melody reminiscent of the *Carry On* and *Confessions Of* series of films, cheeky British comedies of the 1960s and '70s regarded today with a mixture of nostalgic affection and politically correct repugnance. As he passes a house, cheekily numbered 69, he is lured from an upper window by a blonde Mature Dominatrix in a low-cut blouse, fishnets, PVC skirt, thigh-high boots and heavily applied make-up. Her presence on screen is accompanied by a brief shift to a calypso beat, signifying, with her costume, a cheeky, trashy glamour. Once inside the house, which is gaudily decorated, filled with porcelain ornaments and featuring one long, phallic cactus, the dominatrix orders him to strip, then dresses him in a rubber gimpsuit, complete with full-head mask and dog chain. She dons a short faux-fur coat and thenceforth takes him 'for a walk,' forcing him onto all fours and making him put litter into a bin. Once his punishment is over, he is released from his chain and sent off running down the street, still in his rubber outfit. As the advertisement ends, the Mature Dominatrix spies another young man dropping litter, and the tagline 'Don't be a gimp,' with the Keep Britain Tidy logo, appears over a rippled, black rubber background.

The scenario, for the older viewer at least, may bring to mind the Monty Python 'Blackmail' sketch mentioned above. Both the Python sketch and the Keep Britain Tidy advertisement incorporate a dominatrix who entices men into her suburban home, lending a certain middle-class identity to the stereotype. A second resemblance, for those who remember her, is to the British Madam Cynthia Payne, whose sex parties at her home in Streatham, South London, brought her fame, nationwide affection and notoriety in the late 1970s and '80s. It is through true-life characters such as Payne that the Mature Dominatrix stereotype has become fixed in the public imagination. Instead of seeming dangerous she is regarded with fondness, much as Payne herself has been over the last thirty years. She plays the role of the kinky Madam, she is not by any means a true sadist, whatever that label may connote.

The Vamp Dominatrix, the younger, truly dangerous 'Miss Whiplash' is the most common of the four stereotypes. She will tend to be devastatingly attractive, often in full-body PVC suits and thigh-length boots with six inch heels. She is far more extreme in her behaviours than the Mature Dominatrix, and although she also has comic associations, she is much more sadistic. The Vamp Dominatrix is often sensationalised in the tabloids with her partner in the binary relationship, the Public Authority Male Sub. As one male submissive wrote to me, because of media stereotypes: 'most [...] people see BDSM as women in latex whipping rich, professional men.' These rich, professional men will often be mature, possibly overweight, frequently from the legal or political professions, dressed in underwear or leather posing-pouch, stockings and a ball-gag or gimp mask. The conventional scenario finds the Public Authority Male Sub seeking discipline and punishment from the Vamp Dominatrix as an outlet or escape from his position of power in society – a typical power exchange, or PE as the BDSM community has referred to it.

An example of this partnership can be found in another recent advertisement, this time from Friends of the Earth as part of their 'The Big Ask' campaign. The short viral movie, called 'Sticky Question,' has an elderly cleaner in a hotel walking in on a Vamp

Dominatrix who is punishing a Public Authority Male Sub.^[12] The hotel room, naturally, is number 169, with the first digit hanging down. The male is tied to a four-poster bed with a satsuma in his mouth, the slim, young, PVC-clad Vamp Dominatrix standing over him with a red suede flogger telling him 'You've made Mistress very, very angry.' The cleaner is played by the British comic actress Bella Emberg, a virtual fixture of television comedy in the UK since the 1960s, principally in the shows of Benny Hill and Russ Abbot. She enters the room and launches into a verbal attack on the man who, it turns out, is her local MP, about not involving himself in issues of global climate change. Like most advertising, the length of the piece demands fast assumptions to be made and so makes use of the implied narrative that attaches itself to these stereotypes and, like the Keep Britain Tidy advertisement, this BDSM scenario is presented in a comic mode, encouraging laughter at the MP caught in such a scandalous situation. The message, however, is that his lack of action on climate change is more scandalous than his secret liaisons in hotel rooms. It did not escape the attention of the female submissive who commented on this advertisement to me that it has an uncomfortable association with the Conservative MP Stephen Milligan, who was found dead in his home on 7th February 1994, in stockings and suspenders, an orange segment in his mouth, and an electrical flex holding a black bin liner over his head. It is partly from such news stories as this that the Public Authority Male Sub stereotype hails. The implied narrative that is already known by the viewer of the advertisement is that the Public Authority Male Sub seeks, and can afford, release or relief from his professional duties in our society. Like the stereotypical Young Male Sub of the Keep Britain Tidy narrative, the irony is that he is genuinely guilty and deserves punishment.

The viral movie, the short movie designed specifically to be consumed on the internet, has the same imperatives as the advertisement, and a large number of commercial businesses now use the viral movie for this purpose (the viral ad). Like the conventional advertisement, the viral movie must communicate information quickly and so the use of stereotypes is abundant, as are the employment of a comic mode and the appeal of sex. One of the first viral ads to become internationally popular was the Agent Provocateur campaign, in which Kylie Minogue rode a bucking bronco wearing only underwear – a less likely choice for a television advertisement. A recent viral ad released by Mates, the condom manufacturer, makes full use of the sex 'appeal,' but also public perceptions of BDSM and fetish stereotypes.^[13] The narrative, like the Friends of the Earth movie, is located in a hotel, the stereotypical setting for secret and kinky liaisons. Four couples in separate rooms are shown indulging in their particular fetish: a Domme in PVC with a young man, a doctor and nurse, a scantily clad gentleman applying strawberries and cream to his partner, and a plushophile couple^[14] dressed as rabbits with a briefcase of large carrots. Each couple is young, good-looking and heterosexual. Their kinky games are interrupted by the shaking of chandeliers and sounds of sexual intercourse taking place in another room. Overcome by curiosity, the four couples

venture along the red corridor to the room from which the sounds are emitting and knock on the door, only to find that a straight, conventional couple is having fantastic, fulfilling sex. Better sex, in fact, than that which has been interrupted amongst the fetishists. A tagline explains why this is; the couple has been using the new Mates 'Intensify' range of condoms and lubricants, implying that they do not have to artificially 'spice up' their love-life with 'perversions' in order to have great sex. The narrative ends with the rabbits walking sadly back along the corridor, one discarding a carrot over his shoulder. The ad is clearly aimed at the viewer who will relate to the 'normal' heterosexual couple, referred to as 'vanilla' in the BDSM community, and who will regard the fetishists and BDSMers as 'other,' not-normal, perverted, to-be-laughed-at. Its message is based upon an assumption that such people must resort to these perversions because their sex-life is lacking in some way, all communicated instantly through stereotypes.

Interestingly, the comic constructions of the BDSM participant found in the advertisements I have outlined, as well as that of a Vamp Dominatrix in the recent on-line Mini advertisements,^[15] do not seem to cause offense amongst those in the BDSM scene. Rather they are appreciated for their comic potential. One female dominant wrote that they 'depict BDSM as perfectly normal and natural while milking the humour.' A female submissive argued: 'Why should we not laugh at ourselves, just like everyone else does? It *is* funny to see a cleaning lady being more dominant than a Domme!' Perhaps, then, there is a case for the proposal that pleasure can be gained from even the most stereotypical representations of the BDSM scene.

Responding to the Stereotypes on the Screen

Out of the four stereotypes found in familiar perceptions of BDSM, only the Vamp Dominatrix is commonly found in feature-length movies. One memorable example of the overt use of the stereotype is in the Mel Gibson movie *Payback*,^[16] in which Lucy Liu plays Mistress Pearl, a Vamp Dominatrix who takes her job very seriously and who has implied links to the Chinese Mafia. Despite her vicious sadism, her presence in the film is as comic relief to some of the more serious narrative events. A brief appearance of the Vamp Dominatrix appears also in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*,^[17] with Angelina Jolie as an assassin who dons the Domme's typical outfit for a kill. This overt stereotype, however, is much rarer than covert encodings of the Vamp Dominatrix. What I mean by this is the contemporary construction of the *femme fatale* and of the dark, dangerous woman who bears the visual signifiers of the dominatrix, principally in her costume. I have already mentioned Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman, but other examples include Halle Berry's incarnation of the same character,^[18] Kate Beckinsale in the *Underworld* films^[19] and Geena Davies's alter-ego in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.^[20] Black leather, PVC and rubber are used as signifiers of power, of carefully-honed violent potential, accentuating, as these materials do, the shape of the woman's body. This costume is also, clearly, an erotic signifier, encouraging a gaze at the dangerous female. She may even, as in the

case of Pfeiffer's Catwoman, wield a whip, a stock prop in the construction of the S/M scenario. Although these characters are not in themselves Vamp Dominatrices, they carry the associations of the dominatrix through their costume and, to an extent, their attitude.

This visual reference is just as common in male characters, principally vampyric or monstrous villains or dark superheroes such as those found in the *Batman* films,^[21] the *Blade* films,^[22] *Van Helsing*,^[23] the *X-Men* films^[24] and even Terence Stamp in *Superman II*.^[25] Much of the fetish 'look' of these characters, both male and female, owes a lot to the comic books and graphic novels from which many are derived. The look, and even behaviours, of BDSM and the fetish culture seem evident in many examples in this form of story-telling. A female submissive, when describing her response to such films asked: 'Were the artists [of graphic novels] interested in BDSM and drawing their ideals, or has fetish clothing drawn from teenage fantasy images?' It is an interesting question; which came first, the gothic, fetishist images of the graphic novel or the distinctive costuming of the BDSM community? I will not be dealing with this particular question here, but the respondent's personal feeling was that 'The costume and imagery link with a perception of a kinkier, darker sensuality that is now part of our consciousness.' She is recognising the look of these films as signifiers of something menacing yet erotic, something that suggests that which is forbidden yet desired, the territory of the dark anti-hero. She believes that we understand these signifiers implicitly; they have entered the schemata that we employ to interpret the narrative media.

As far as some within the BDSM community are concerned, a lot of pleasure is taken in the viewing of these images on screen, with several replies to my questionnaire expressing a fondness for the latex or leather outfits of certain superheroes. Some clearly recognised the dominant ideology that allows the dark superhero success in his/her goal, whilst the sadomasochist must be restricted or punished. As one male submissive wrote:

These [the heroic characters] are often better than truly sadomasochistic characters, as one can enjoy the costume and the attitude of the characters without the expectation of their come-uppance. A great example is Jennifer Garner in *Alias*: she looks like a Domme, she acts (sometimes) like a Domme, but because she is doing it for duty rather than sexual pleasure, she is permitted to succeed.

She is not, in other words, a sexual pervert as perceived by the public. She is a powerful, highly sexualised female stereotype, the contemporary *femme fatale*, but without sin and therefore without punishment. The conventional *femme fatale*, the archetype found notably in post-war Hollywood, had access, as Janey Place puts it, to 'her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access unlocked.'^[26] She is aware of and employs the power of her own sexuality, in tandem with another form of law-breaking, usually a crime of some kind such as theft, adultery or murder. In

the patriarchal order, in which the sexually independent woman is a threat, this 'dark' woman is punished, often even killed, for her transgressions. One contemporary rendition of the *femme fatale*, identified here as a covert version of the Vamp Dominatrix, diverts her power and energy into laudable goals, such as the saving of humankind or the fighting of crime. The external signs of the powerful woman in this character are not accompanied by 'wrongdoing,' so unlike the traditional *femme fatale*, she is not punished.

The apparent popularity of this character construction, and of the female dominant generally, was considered by one of the male dominants who responded to the questionnaire. Starting from a position that the media is a male-dominated 'market,' he writes: 'there is a natural need to feed that market. And what with? Imagery of the breast so fondly suckled.' Fascination with the powerful woman, he believes, is down to 'male-mothering fantasies.' He asks:

Who is the person in the male's formative years, that administers most punishments, physical or emotional? Mommy. Who is the person who administers most of the cuddles, of lovey-icky stuff? Again Mommy. [...]
Mommy is the one we need to feel proud of us, as we mature into work-drone.

This response reveals a particular understanding of heterosexual male fantasy, that it revolves around what psychoanalysis might describe as a pre-Oedipal desire for Mother. The Vamp Dominatrix fulfils the role of punishing mother, and her presence in the media, whether overtly as a sadist character or covertly as the powerful, sexualised woman, might suggest that, indeed, she serves a widespread male fantasy. However, as the same respondent went on to note, she is celebrated by female performers, such as Madonna's recent live show in which she re-enacted pony play on stage with four young men in reins. This kind of construction of the Vamp Dominatrix implies an embracing of the stereotype and the power it lends to the woman herself. Although there is not space here to investigate this, a feminist analysis of the female celebration of this stereotype should be conducted.

It is worth noting that, like any social grouping which negotiates or subverts the meaning of a film text, the S/M viewer is likely to draw S/M-related pleasure from mainstream films that have no overt BDSM imagery or characters. A female submissive wrote to me:

For me, many seemingly innocent films and scenes sexually arouse me in a BDSM way, because the character is dominant. For example *Sharpe* doesn't have any overt images that I can think of (other than the bull whip in the latest one) but conveys far more to me than *Lady Chatterley's Lover* ever could because the character is so strong.

What she describes as 'innocent films' that offer pleasure were affirmed by other respondents who listed films such as *The Sound of Music*,^[27] *All About Eve*,^[28] *Doctor Zhivago*^[29] and *Gone with the Wind*,^[30] none of which have deliberate BDSM imagery

nor even the slightest hint of 'kinky' sex. This corresponds to Bill Thompson's review of research conducted into S/M practices, in which *Gone with the Wind*, horror films and pirate scenes are listed as films that first aroused participants at an early age.^[31] One respondent to my questionnaire wrote that the pleasure is a response to 'combinations of power and desire,' concluding that she could see 'what I need or want to see within a film.' Another, a male sub, wondered if the reason he is attracted to certain domination / submission scenarios in historical films is because D/S is something inherent in class systems. The implied role of many submissives is, after all, that of the servant, or even the slave, who is punished for failure to fulfill duties appropriately for the Master or Mistress. This power dynamic is something that is re-enacted in many D/S behaviours. It might not seem strange then that a BDSM viewer of a film not directly representing the lifestyle should discover this dynamic at work.

Returning to stereotypes, the four key characters that I have listed so far are rare in mainstream cinema, being the material instead of advertisements, TV comedies and tabloid newspapers. Vivid representations of sadomasochists do, however, exist in cinema, some of which are important to mention because of the implications they present for a public perception of a person with such tendencies. I will highlight two examples, one sadist and one masochist.

The Sadist Psychopath

David Lynch's neo-noir critique of small-town America, *Blue Velvet*,^[32] incorporates the Sadist Psychopath in the person of Frank, performed by Dennis Hopper. He is a violent, intelligent criminal whose sadistic behaviours are predominantly directed at a night-club singer, Dorothy (Isabella Rosselini). She is instructed to call him 'Daddy,' she is not permitted to look him in the eye, but is forced to spread her legs in front of him while he breathes through an oxygen mask and repeats 'Baby wants to fuck.' She is beaten and abused by him, taunted by scissors, raped, and forced to humiliate herself. Frank's hold over Dorothy is ostensibly his kidnapping of her husband and son, but she, as a Masochist Victim, evidently gains pleasure from his violent, sexual treatment. The Masochist Victim is a complex character who I will not explore in depth here. However, both Dorothy and Frank are constructed as perverts, with leanings toward mental illness, acting as representatives of a perverted underworld that is ultimately resisted by Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan), the young man who becomes involved in their violent relationship. Interestingly, when Dorothy is alone with Jeffrey she becomes dominant, a testament to the complexity of this type in some narratives, forcing him to undress, threatening to stab him if he touches her while she performs fellatio on him. She is, in a term adopted by the BDSM community, 'topping from the bottom,' instructing him how to treat her sadistically, particularly when she begs him to beat her. It is also evident that Jeffrey is aroused, despite his horror at her instructions. Although he hits Dorothy at one stage, he does also ask the question 'Why are there people like Frank?' Despite Jeffrey's

underlying attraction to this behaviour, he is eventually 'saved' from that lifestyle by the end of the movie.

Because it is part of our society's dominant ideology to regard domestic and sexual violence as repellant, these scenes in the film are uncomfortable to watch. Dorothy and Frank are most certainly sadistic and masochistic characters of the highest degree. Dorothy, as a Masochist Victim, is particularly alien, at once pitiful *and* abhorrent as she takes pleasure from vicious treatment. An equation of their behaviour to that of the everyday sadomasochist is, logically speaking, likely to create a perception of the lifestyle as dedicated to real violence and the result of mental illness. Hopper's character, particularly, is one that drew comment from some of the respondents to my questionnaire, a female sadomasochist writing:

Hopper is certainly a lead that you never forget, all that sucking and grunting. I didn't find it sexy, as it seemed to have an element of psychological thriller. [...] It didn't repulse me as such, rather left me feeling very much as if I was an observer and would never be a participant.

What I feel is important about this response is that the individual acknowledges a certain seductive quality to the dominant sadist, as does Dorothy in the film, but she feels distanced from it, recognising it as a movie-construction and not a representation of the real world. It would be difficult to ascertain whether a viewer who is not a BDSM practitioner would distinguish so clearly between the two, and would no doubt be down to the individual's knowledge of the BDSM lifestyle and sophistication as a film viewer. One of the male dominants wrote in his response that this type 'is always depicted as violent.' He raises a recent episode of *Wire in the Blood* as an example,^[33] in which, 'The female "victim(s)" have to die, so that we can live happily in the knowledge that Male Dominants are evil, but Female ones sexy.' In the episode in question, a serial killer is found to be a sadist who lures his female victims into an existence of isolation and suffering, a sensationalised version of the 'Gorean' lifestyle (a strongly patriarchal brand of BDSM), before murdering them. It is this popular image of the male dominant, as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know,' that is regarded as 'such a shame' by a number of people involved in the BDSM community.

The Sadist Psychopath stereotype can be found in a variety of mainstream films, examples being *The Cell*,^[34] *Dead Ringers*,^[35] and the Japanese film *Audition*.^[36] One might even suggest that Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) in Hitchcock's 1943 thriller *Shadow of a Doubt* assumes the Sadist Psychopath role. In almost every case the character's activities are sexually-related and linked to abuse or mental illness, and thus help to consolidate a negative stereotype of the sadist. What is fascinating, however, is that although the characters themselves may be regarded as repulsive by the S/M viewer, their practices are sometimes not. Several wrote to me that they found certain scenes enjoyable in terms of their fantasy potential, such as being locked in a glass cage and being regularly doused with water, the 'gleam' of gynaecological instruments, even the

helplessness of the victim of gang-rape. There is a clear distinction that is being made in these responses between the movie, real experience and personal fantasy, a distinction that is not particularly encouraged by the representations found in the media.

The Self-Harming Masochist

The second stereotype that I want to highlight is the Self-Harming Masochist, a key example being Lee in the 2002 movie *Secretary*, directed by Steven Shainberg and based on a short story by American writer Mary Gaitskill. Lee, played by Maggie Gyllenhaal, is a young woman struggling to overcome a nervous breakdown, a stint in a mental institution and a habit of self-harming. When she begins a job as a secretary she enters an S/M relationship with her boss, Edward Grey, played by James Spader, an actor who is no stranger to characters with sensational sexual proclivities. Edward teaches Lee how to cease self-harming and embrace consensual sadomasochistic play, particularly the power exchange practiced by some practitioners of the BDSM lifestyle in which a submissive allows a dominant to take responsibility for his / her choices in mundane daily life, such as remaining in a seat for a length of time, or eating just four peas with one's dinner.

The viewer is encouraged to identify with Lee, and to enjoy her journey towards liberation and love, ending in a heterosexual pairing and marriage to Edward. The sadomasochist, so frequently the pervert or villain, is reconstructed as a protagonist. Neither character suffers the usual punishment for their perversion, and thus the perversion itself is reconstructed as acceptable, *except* that Lee has a history of mental instability and self-harming.

This film drew more responses than any other in my research, and the comments are most interesting. One Domme wondered if it was appropriate for a dominant character to conduct S/M practices with a woman he knew to have a history of mental illness. A male submissive also wrote that the film seemed to say:

[...] to be into anything kinky you had to have some mental illness first. This is really disappointing for me as it completely misrepresents what BDSM is all about. You don't have to be ill to recognise / desire a different form of power exchange in a relationship!

A female sub felt that: 'As a completely non-abused natural born sub, I wasn't very happy about her cutting herself,' whilst a male dominant disagreed, stating that it was good to see a self-harmer have a 'happy ending.' This may reflect an awareness in the respondent that the mentally ill individual (as many self-harmers are regarded) has just as much of a right to engage in BDSM as anyone else. Clearly, some S/M viewers were unhappy about this representation of their lifestyle, whilst others saw it positively. However, even more importantly, a number of individuals made the vital point that one

should not regard the film as a representation of reality. One male dominant wrote: 'it was a piece of fiction with a BDSM theme, much as *The Da Vinci Code* is a religious fiction.' Another female submissive agreed, stating dryly:

Why some folk feel the need to compare it to their lifestyle I don't know. It's a work of fiction...The Oompa Loompas who live down my street didn't complain about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*...they saw it as a piece of cinema, that was that.

Behind the scorn, there is a sophisticated acceptance here that mainstream cinema may well have little to do with everyday realities, and no offence is taken at the skewed representations found of the BDSM community. A male dominant expressed a similar response, writing: 'I guess I tend to find most representations of BDSM in the films I've seen generally inoffensive and when noticed, usually humorous (probably due to inaccuracy).' In this case it would appear that humour is derived from the impression that the filmmakers are misinformed about the BDSM scene. Unfortunately, the construction and consumption of stereotypes is such that some viewers *do* accept mainstream representations as authentic, and so attitudes towards certain social groupings are likely to be informed by cinema. In fact, this likelihood was referred to by two of the respondents. A professional Domme wrote about her personal response to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma / Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), the film that notoriously led to the closing down of the Old Compton cinema club in 1977 after being screened in full without a BBFC certificate. The film is a political interpretation of the Marquis de Sade's novel *120 Days of Sodom*, transposed to wartime fascist Italy, depicting the kidnap, sadistic torture and murder of nine teenagers by a group of libertines. The film contains scenes of rape, sodomy, the eating of excrement and mutilation, and only received an official classification as '18' from the BBFC in 2000. By this time it was understood by the BBFC that '[a]lthough the film contained many disturbing scenes, the Board agreed that its intention was to deliberately shock and appall audiences at the evil of fascism and to vividly illustrate the idea that "absolute power corrupts absolutely"'.^[37] In response to her viewing of the film, the Domme wrote:

The film is disturbing in the extreme even for the most hardened sadomasochists. Everything shown within the film has an isolated political reasoning but the film is so shocking that if I had seen this before my journey had begun then I'm certain it would never have started.

The writer is recognising here that the content of this particular film might have affected her attitude towards the practices of sadomasochism before becoming involved in the 'scene,' but the confession is based upon an understanding that the quotidian behaviours of the S/M community, with which she is very familiar, are vastly different from those found within the film.

The same male submissive who discussed his responses to *Secretary*, also pondered the effects of sensational media representations of BDSM, feeling that there was a

deliberate 'skewing' of the 'scene' to affect the public's perception. He felt that, although certain uses and abuses of the female form in the media are still common, as soon as a titillating story of a celebrity's kinky habits hits the headlines, it is instantly a tale of 'Miss Whiplash.' He commented:

I feel that for people who are coming into the scene or trapped in vanilla relationships, we use media representations to inform our choices. For a long time, I felt this was a bad thing to get into; actually 'hurting' someone must be bad. Now I understand it (better) this is just so far from the reality!

The individual's view of 'vanilla' aside, there is a belief here that the media are used to gauge potential lifestyle choices, BDSM in particular, as either 'good' or 'bad.' Because of the broad availability of the mass media, it is proposed here that people are most likely to go to these channels of communication for information, where BDSM is consistently constructed as a moral issue. The effect of media images is a hotly contended issue, but certainly this opinion expresses a conviction that BDSM is not represented with fidelity in these mainstream forms. Although S/M is a lifestyle and set of practices gradually becoming more socially acceptable in some quarters, it remains enigmatic, it continues to be categorised as 'seedy' and 'perverse,' and so retains a sensational reputation. Like sex, sadomasochism sells.

Secretary, as a film that ostensibly embraces S/M by placing practitioners as its protagonists, appears, but for this very reason fails, to make efforts towards de-sensationalising the lifestyle, constructing its characters as everyday people with 'normal' needs such as a loving relationship. One of the means by which this is attempted is by the incorporation of heterosexual romantic closure. In her list of complaints about the movie, a female dominant wrote:

Wedding bells, conventional happy ever after: I object to that 'normalization' of BDSM, of trying to legitimize it by making it look as similar to vanilla as possible: 'No worries, masochist subbie girls, all they want is married suburban bliss, [...] BDSM is just another way of aspiring at tying the knot.' The long 'romantic' end in the movie put me off big time.

The resistance of 'normal' that is articulated here is expressive of many of the comments that I received. To have the BDSM lifestyle packaged as normal runs against self-perceptions in this community: there is an evident and active confrontation with conventional, socially-acceptable, routine living. There is a celebration of 'otherness' and difference as much as might be found in any sub- or counter-culture. Herein lies an interesting paradox: whilst the respondents to the questionnaire consistently observed a large gap between the real lifestyle of BDSMers and what is found on the screen, one that emphasises the not-normal nature of BDSM, there is a simultaneous desire to be regarded as not-normal. Although a specific sensationalism is attached to the lifestyle in the media, and is rejected by many in the S/M community, its members celebrate their

reputation in society as singular and bizarre. It would appear, then, that it is a particular brand of non-normalcy that is aspired to, one that does not equate to the narratives and stereotypes commonly found in mainstream film.

Opinions on the resolution of *Secretary* were not of one accord, however. Another female dominant wrote that, '[i]t was a kind of fairy story. It managed to romanticise something which is often portrayed as 'sick' and I greatly appreciated that intention.' This alternative interpretation shows gratitude to the filmmakers for producing a film that overtly contradicts common constructions of sadomasochists, such as those found in *Blue Velvet* or *The Cell*, in which these individuals are mentally ill. The fact that Lee is a self-harmer is not an issue for this viewer, nor that the film is not a faithful representation of the everyday. What is important to her is that the characters are allowed the level of normalcy that was rejected by the more critical female dominant.

The presence of the Self-Harming Masochist in *Secretary* contributes to a certain sensational construction of S/M which, despite the trite heterosexual resolution, succeeds in correlating the lifestyle with mental illness. The same stereotype is found in an even more extreme incarnation in the French film *The Piano Teacher*,^[38] in which the title character, Erika (Isabelle Huppert), attempts to escape her restrictive lifestyle and domineering mother through a sadomasochistic relationship with a student. Erika is a dichotomy of sexual naivety and obsession, visiting adult shops during the day and viewing pornography in private booths while holding the used tissues of previous clients to her face. Despite an initial revulsion at her requests to be beaten and humiliated, the student, Walter (Benoît Magimel), enacts an attack on Erika that leaves her either shocked and disgusted at herself and her perverse desires, or deeply fulfilled, depending on one's interpretation of the scene. Both her self-harming habit and her desire to be beaten and humiliated appear to be efforts to control her own life, but at no stage does she appear to achieve this goal. Erika's final masochistic act is the self-harming scenario taken to its furthest extreme, suicide by stabbing her own chest with a kitchen knife. Like her other self-harming episode, which takes place privately in her bathroom, this act is played out alone in the empty foyer of a music hall. No-one observes this final performance of defiance to a man who has rejected her because of her 'perverse' desires, and she leaves the venue and walks off-screen, presumably to die in solitude. Her self-harming habit, her consumption of pornography whilst smelling used tissues, her suicide, and the fact that her father had died previously in a mental institution, together imply that she has a mental illness. Specifically, and in accord with *Secretary*, an association of masochism to self-harming helps to reiterate a perception of the masochist as mentally ill.

Dark, Scary Stuff

Why is it then that the characters of the Sadist Psychopath and the Self-harming Masochist have become typical representatives of the S/M lifestyle? Their capacity to

shock is, in all likelihood, an attractive appeal for the filmmaker, but what lies beneath the construction of BDSM as something genuinely dangerous? What is so appealing about this world to mainstream audiences? Is there, perhaps, a 'safe' distance found in consuming these narratives on screen that prevents a direct involvement yet allows erotic titillation for the viewer? No doubt much can be attributed to the media scandals generated by the deaths of public figures such as Stephen Milligan and Michael Hutchence, and television documentaries about the 'seedy underworld' of sadomasochism. According to one female submissive, however, perceptions of BDSM as morally 'wrong' or perilous come from an association of its practices with real violence. She wrote:

One of the problems (for mainstreamers) with BDSM is that practices and activities often refer to dark, scary stuff, using bondage, pain, fear and even terror as fantasy and sexual fuel. Of course, often these references have a basis in something that in its origin was anything but sexy (think about real torture) - but in the same way that we understand horror films as thrilling, representations of bondage, pain and fear, etc., [...] can also be understood as sexy (or aesthetically interesting) by mainstreamers.

It is the 'dark, scary stuff' that is role-played by sadomasochists that repels and is evaluated as wrong. Ideologically, even morally, speaking, the games played in the S/M community seem to be regarded as real bondage, real pain, real terror, even real torture. These practices, as the female sub notes, are not in themselves erotic, but terrifying. She goes on, however, to suggest that the same kind of appeal generated by the horror film is at work in BDSM's re-enactment of scenarios of physical and mental domination and submission. The thrill that is engendered, she believes, is one that is potentially attractive, even 'sexy,' for the mainstream viewer. What is at stake here is an understanding of the viewer's response to on-screen narratives as much as of BDSM behaviour. The latter is both a real practice, and a not-real re-enactment of fantasy scenarios. The horror film's narrative is both a reference to real horrific possibilities (depending on the particular narrative), and a not-real fantasy construction on a screen. It is in the real possibilities of BDSM and horror films that the participant or viewer draws such pleasure; it is in the assurance of its artificiality that the individual knows him/herself to be 'safe' from genuine threat. Perhaps this is possible because of the discernment of the viewer, who may effectively differentiate between the two. As Bill Thompson puts it in his investigation into sadomasochism: 'Knowing what real violence is, the general public can easily tell the difference between "kinky" people who like to dress up for sex, and the "sickoes" who violently force their wishes upon others.'^[39] The problem comes when we realise that what constitutes 'kinky' and 'sick' is subjective, and so even the distance of cinema cannot prevent a moral judgement upon both the act itself and the act of watching.

Responses to *Secretary*, as I have noted, were mixed, but several made the point that the film goes some way to showing the 'vanilla' viewer something of the intimacy and

respect that goes into many BDSM practices. Another film which attempts to depict the lifestyle of the contemporary BDSMer is the British comedy *Preaching to the Perverted*,^[40] the movie-flagship of BDSM in the UK, which tells the story of Tanya Cheex (Guinevere Turner). Tanya is a Vamp Dominatrix who is taken to court for her practices which are regarded as actual bodily harm, being a topical response to the notorious Spanner Case of 1990-91. Real-life members of the BDSM community were involved in many of the scenes in the film, and their input was significant in the construction of the BDSM club-environment and practices. The young man sent to incriminate Tanya, Peter (Christien Anholt), is a Christian who is gradually drawn into the world of BDSM. Working his way into Tanya's affections, Peter discovers that her darkest fantasy is in fact 'vanilla' sex, which she indulges in just once whilst wearing a white wedding dress. The movie concludes with the birth of their child, and Peter wearing PVC trousers as he cradles the baby.

Although the film represents the BDSM club-scene with an unusual level of authenticity, many individuals commented that they were greatly disappointed with the narrative, principally because they felt that Tanya Cheex 'submits' to a vanilla lifestyle. She represents a fissure in the durability of the Dominatrix, a stereotype that is celebrated in the BDSM community. It is worth noting that Tanya does not fully embrace a 'normal' lifestyle, as she tells Peter not to expect any regular vanilla sex despite them having a child together, and she continues with her BDSM practices. It is in fact Peter that is the most changed by the end of the narrative. However, in addition to this, the comic mode of the film was not enjoyed by at least one respondent who replied that it was 'too nudge-nudge-wink-wink, with its *Carry On...* references'. The film features such British comedians as Ricky Tomlinson, Sue Johnston, Roger Lloyd-Pack and Keith Allen, and overtly constructs characters, particularly submissives, as to-be-laughed-at. The kind of cheeky humour typical of the *Carry On* films, its 'giggling naughtiness',^[41] went out of fashion with the British public in the late 1970s, so to use this mode of comedy in a representation of an explicit set of sado-masochistic behaviours, then, may not sit well with practitioners of BDSM today. Whatever the reason, however, this particular respondent was not the only person to express dissatisfaction with the film. One male sub wrote, after a verdict on *Secretary's* resolution as 'crap,' 'I'm still more fond of it [*Secretary*] than the awful *Preaching to the Perverted*.'

A multitude of other film and television examples could be explored, such as *Quills*,^[42] *The Night Porter*,^[43] David Cronenberg's *Crash*,^[44] *Story of O*,^[45] Almodóvar's *Tie me Up! Tie me Down!*,^[46] and certain episodes of *CSI*^[47] and *Sugar Rush*,^[48] but few of these were discussed at any length by the respondents to the questionnaire. Instead I shall conclude with a proposition that S/M viewers of mainstream cinema see little relationship between many of the stereotypical characters designed to represent the sadomasochist and themselves, and are frustrated by the implications of mental illness or psychopathy that are regularly made. However, many have the maturity and sophistication to recognise the consistent gap between mainstream film and everyday existence. They often seem to respond positively to many of the fantasy scenarios

constructed that include S/M practices on the screen. They also draw a great deal of pleasure from mainstream cinema that has nothing ostensibly to do with sadomasochism, but which involves a dynamic of domination and submission between characters. I would like to end with a quotation from a Domme in London which expresses a desire for mainstream representation in keeping with revised treatments now given to other social groupings, such as the gay community or ethnic populations: 'I'm looking forward to a BDSM^[49] film in the future that is not a joke, a freak circus, and that doesn't attempt to explain or legitimize itself, especially in terms of "accepted normality". It will come.'

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[1] *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992).

[2] 1992.

[3] Director: Terence Young, 1963.

[4] Director Martin Campbell, 1995.

[5] Broadcast by the BBC between 1982 and 1992.

[6] Episode 18, 'Live from the Grill-o-Mat', Series 2, first broadcast by the BBC on October 27th 1970; also included in the Monty Python film, *And Now for Something*

[7] Episode 9, Series 1, first broadcast by the BBC on 14th December 1969.

[8] Phillips, 1998, p. 65.

[9] Omniviant is a conjunction of *omni* and deviant, and is used to identify an individual who enacts both domination and submission either simultaneously or at separate times.

[10] The word 'Dominatrix' is less common in the BDSM scene than it is in the media and is part of the fixing of the stereotype herself. More frequently used are the terms 'fem dom' (female dominant) or Domme (pronounced 'Dommay' by some). The term 'Dom' is often used for male dominant.

[11] The advertisement can currently be viewed on-line at the Keep Britain Tidy website, URL <http://www.encams.org/general/advert.asp> (visited 5th August 2006).

[12] The viral movie was not subsequently used in cinemas, but was launched on-line on January 26th, 2006, URL <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=851115134728998629> (visited 5th August 2006).

[13] The viral video can currently be viewed on the You Tube website at URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN_9dCPKSDw [visited 5th August 2006].

[14] Plushophile is the name given to the individual with a fetish for stuffed toys, cuddly toys, teddies, etc., and who may also dress in a furry / 'plushie' costume.

[15] MINI Canada site, URL <http://www.neverinneutral.com/dominatrix/> A PVC-clad Vamp Dominatrix demonstrates the remarkable 'control' of the Mini with a selection of floggers, paddles and whips. (visited 18th November 2006).

[16] Brian Helgeland, 1999.

[17] Doug Lyman, 2005.

[18] *Catwoman* (Pitof, 2004).

[19] *Underworld* (Len Wiseman, 2003) and *Underworld: Evolution* (Len Wiseman, 2006).

[20] Renny Harlin, 1996.

[21] *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992), *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995), *Batman and Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997), *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005).

[22] *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), *Blade II* (Guillermo del Toro, 2002), *Blade: Trinity* (David S. Goyer, 2004).

- [23] Stephen Sommers, 2004.
- [24] *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), *X2* (Bryan Singer, 2003), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006).
- [25] Richard Lester, 1980.
- [26] Place, Janey 'Women in Film Noir,' in E. Ann Kaplan (ed) *Women in Film Noir*, London: BFI 1998, p.49
- [27] Robert Wise, 1965.
- [28] Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950.
- [29] David Lean, 1965.
- [30] Victor Fleming, 1939.
- [31] Thompson, Bill *Sadomasochism: Painful Perversion or Pleasurable Play?*, London: Continuum 1994, p. 161.
- [32] 1986.
- [33] Episode 2, Season 4, 'Time to Murder and Create,' 20th September, 2006, ITV.
- [34] Tarsem Singh, 2000.
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- [38] Michael Haneke, 2001.
- [39] Thompson, 1994, p. 66.
- [40] Stuart Urban, 1997.
- [41] Medhurst, Andy *The Observer Review*, 30 July 1995, p.3.
- [42] Philip Kaufman, 2000.
- [43] Liliana Cavani, 1974.

[44] David Cronenberg, 1996.

[45] Just Jaeckin, 1975.

[46] Pedro Almodóvar, 1990.

[47] Episode 209 'Slaves of Las Vegas' (15th Nov, 2001, Season 2); Episode 315 'Lady Heather's Box' (13th Feb, 2003, Season 3); Episode 406 'Fur and Loathing' (30th Oct, 2003, Season 4); Episode 508 'King Baby' (18th Nov, 2004, Season 5); Episode 533 'Pirates of the Third Reich' (9th Feb, 2006, Season 6).

[48] Series 2, Episode 1, 15th June, 2006, Channel 4.

[49] The 'm' of BDSm is placed by this writer in lower case to indicate the submissive nature of the masochist, whilst the rest of the acronym remains in upper case.

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